

Mrs E.E.M. Russell

On April 28 1959, before the City Council of Pietermaritzburg, an item dealing with the conferment of the Freedom of the City upon Eleanor Ethel Mariella Russell was unanimously carried. Thus it was that in due course the City of Pietermaritzburg was able to pay tribute to a remarkable lady, a former Mayor, eminent educationist, a fighter for women's rights and a friend whose loyalty would never be questioned.

It was my privilege to propose the original motion which led to the investiture of Mrs Russell to this singular honour, on 21 April 1959, in my capacity as Councillor and Deputy Mayor of the City.

I had known Mrs Russell all my life. She had been my mother's Headmistress at Girls' Collegiate School, as Miss Columbine, and had played a part in my family's fortunes for more than sixty years. It was to Mrs Russell that I went when I decided to seek office on the City Council in 1953 — a young, untried, inexperienced member of the community.

Despite my total lack of knowledge about Local Government, her response to my proposal was an immediate and wholehearted interest. At the same election on October 7th 1953 Mrs Russell was a candidate in Ward 5. Her decision to return to Local Government after an absence of a few years was welcomed by most citizens but, such are the ironies of fate, the year I entered Local Government, Mrs Russell was defeated by 317 votes. She made no further attempts to enter Local Government but devoted her time and energies to her other interests, the National Council of Women, the University of Natal and many charitable and social organisations to which she had been a tower of strength over many years.

Who was Eleanor Ethel Mariella Russell?

She was an Englishwoman who came to this country in 1910, academically unqualified, to take over the Vice-Principalship of the Girl's Collegiate School but who, in later years was honoured by the University of Natal with an Honorary degree of Master of Arts.

She was National Chairman of the National Council of Women of South Africa. She was a member of the South African delegation to an International Congress in Helsinki.

She headed innumerable committees all of which dealt with the improvement of the quality of life of all the people of Pietermaritzburg.

She was an eminent speaker and much sought after in the many facets of charitable and social activities.

But, above all, she was a human being concerned with people, their problems, their desires and aspirations and their place in society. The creation of the first African village, Sobantu, can be directly attributed to her actions and many of the improvements in race relations bear the imprint of Eleanor Russell. To write in honour of a gracious lady is a task which I value but there can be few people who can adequately cover the excellence of her personality. To follow her example as the second woman Mayor of the City is ever-present in my mind and to emulate her style, her ability and her intellect is virtually impossible, but there is no better model upon which



MRS E.E.M. RUSSELL at ninety

Photograph: *The Natal Witness*

I would care to base my own career. The last occasion on which I saw Mrs Russell was on 28 September 1980. She was 98 years old and a resident of Sunnyside Park. She had been unresponsive to visitors but I requested the Matron to allow me to see her. She lay still with eyes closed. When the Matron said 'Mrs Russell, do you remember Mona's daughter?' she opened her eyes and in a strong voice said 'Yes'. I said, 'Mrs Russell, I've come to tell you that I'm the Mayor'. With that she took my hand and a benign smile spread across her face. She held my hand tightly until she lapsed into sleep.

She died on December 18 1980, the day I left on a tour of Israel. I was in America the day she was given the Freedom of the City and I was in Tel Aviv the day she died. Fate decreed that I would not be with her in the moment of civic glory, nor for her funeral in the City on January 5 1981 but, although a light of great eminence went out then, her memory and example are with me constantly. Upon my return from Israel I was able to pay tribute to a woman of extraordinary talent at a City Council meeting on January 29 1981.

There must have been a divine purpose in a life like hers. Perhaps to make the rest of us humble and rejoice; humble because it eludes our classifications and we cannot explain it; and rejoicing, because it is a gift which lights our path.

PAMELA REID